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Between the Old and the New “Art of Movement”: Dance at the Intersections of Cinema’s Past, Present and Future

Abstract:

From the first «scènes de danses et de ballets» in early cinema to recent experiments with digital media by choreographers like Merce Cunningham, dance and dancers seem to be «cinematic subjects par excellence», as Siegfried Kracauer states. The idea of a specific affinity between dance and film not only characterizes Kracauer’s theories, but draws a continuous, subtextual line through filmtheoretical thinking from its very beginning up to recent approaches (see i.e. Giorgio Agamben, Nicole Brenez). As Nicolas Villodre points out, reference to dance has been especially prominent in transitional periods of film history, in times of negotiating and approving of new film techniques, practices and poetics: in the first experiments with coloration, the colours seem to ‘dance’ on the dancers’ veils; the ‘first’ talkie emerged as a musical with abundant dance scenes and Lev Kouleshov developed his pathbreaking theory on montage rhythm partly by filming dancers. Offering a large field for experimentation, dance and its filmic references thus seem particularly apt to explore how cinema continuously reinvents itself reflecting the transition from established aesthetic forms to new concepts and visual strategies.

My paper investigates how films and film theory negotiate and renegotiate questions like «what is cinema?» and «what will be cinema?» by drawing on dance metaphors and dance concepts. By focussing on dance in film and film theory from 1900 to the 1920s, I will argue that filmic dance references serve as motifs and figures of speech placing film discourse in a constant oscillation between the return of the Old and the anticipation of the New. By 1900, against the background of *Lebens-* and *Körperreform* (‘philosophical vitalism and the body reform movement’), dance advances to one of the central metaphors and theoretical models for the arts that reflect and define modern life by a poetics of movement. This cultural context highly influenced by the paradigm of dance has also framed and affected film productions and film theory. In my paper, I will demonstrate that filmic dance references of this period do not only serve as strategies to ennoble the new medium by assigning it a place in the system of the traditional arts and relating it to the aesthetic discourses of the 19th century. Furthermore, the highly auratic dimension of dance as well as a new understanding of dance (developed within the *Tanzreform*) seem to have inspired film theorists like Béla Balázs, Jean Tedesco or Germaine Dulac to project a utopian potential of (what in the 1920s seemed) a ‘future’ aesthetics of cinema. Interestingly, the futurity of this discourse still remains valid up to current postulations of a «new» and forthcoming dance-like film aesthetics.

CV:

Kristina Köhler is a research assistant at the Institute of Cinema Studies at the University of Zurich. She studied in Brussels, Weimar and Lyon, and received a diploma in European Film and Media Studies both from the Bauhaus University of Weimar and the Université Lumière Lyon 2. In 2007, she worked as a research assistant at the International Graduate Centre for the Studies of Culture of the Justus Liebig University Giessen. She is the initiator and coordinator of the interdisciplinary peer-group network *FilmWissen* (funded by the University of Zurich and the Swiss Federation) that addresses and discusses the specific conditions of doctoral research on film and visual culture.

She is currently preparing her Ph.D. thesis on the historic interrelations of film and dance and their respective discourses from 1895 to the 1960s. Her research interests include early cinema, film theory and its history, intermediality, media philosophy, visual culture, performativity as well as dance history and theory.