

“Camera as _____”

Loading the frame in screendance by Jeannette Ginslov

This article was inspired by Aristotle’s notion of Rhetoric, the five Core Course Headings originated by Bata Passchier CEO of the South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance (AFDA), dance filmmaker Douglas Rosenberg’s novel idea of “the camera as carnivore”, and my own research on “loading the camera” and capturing discourses in a screendance work.

All these ideas are about enframing, packaging and curating epistemologies, providing easy access to the discourses embedded in both the form and content of any screendance work. This process amplifies the intention of the work, through and with the media, in order to communicate more effectively to a viewer.

Although these inspirational ideas cannot be discussed in great depth here, I intend to demonstrate briefly how they may be adapted in the making of a powerfully loaded screendance work. You may also by the end of this process attempt the following assignment: while viewing your screendance work, select PAUSE at any frame. You should be able to identify all these points - at least ten per frame!

ARISTOTLE’S RHETORIC

All communication is rhetorical. Intention needs to be communicated within each frame. In his Rhetoric, Aristotle describes how a speaker can engage and persuade his audience by taking the following into consideration: elements of style, delivery, emotional tone and narrative device; the use of metaphor, comedy, linear or non-linear storytelling to evoke strong emotions in the viewer. Included is the use of reasoning to construct a believable viewpoint. Basically, Aristotle calls for four elements to be included in the speaker or writer’s arguments.

Aim – what is the effect you want on a viewer?

Audience - who are your viewers?

Medium - what is the medium of delivery? e.g. YouTube clip, screendance work for a single screen, an installation, a mash up

Subject – what is the topic, what are the discourses in your topic?

AFDA CORE COURSE HEADINGS

Before you shoot, the following headings may be useful to find in your frame. I have adapted the main headings for the AFDA Core Course for screendance usage (see below)

Narrative/Engagement: Your intention, idea, concept, and narrative - whether linear, non-linear or poetic. How and why are you drawing your audience in?

Performance/Kinesthetics/Emotion: This foregrounds the psychological, sociological, anthropological, emotional and physical manifestations that your performers physically demonstrate, in order to engage the viewer. How and why are they performing the choreography in such a manner for the frame? How are you directing them?

Medium/Delivery: This includes the background research that supports your concept, as well as the use of the various technologies of screendance: choreography, dance style, lighting, camera work, edit choices, vertical montage or linear progression.

Aesthetics/Form: your aesthetic tools, both visual and sonic; the look and feel, including the locations, set, costumes, art and design

Production Control/Economy: all aspects of production, marketing, management, finance and the law

“CAMERA AS _____”

In 2006 Douglas Rosenberg originated the idea of “camera as carnivore”: as a predator with a carnal appetite. In the 1980’s Rosenberg noted that from a Marxist point of view the camera’s gaze sexualized the body of the dancer, rendering it a spectacle for mainstream consumption. The body was captured in such a way that the “marks of production [were] erased” allowing for the triumph of commodity, voyeurism and fetishism, perpetuating the male gaze that suited mainstream viewership. In contrast, certain dance films by DV8, La La Human Steps, L’Esquisse, Phillipe Decoufle and others “effaced the ‘marks of production’, in favor of a style that allowed for more mainstream distribution and in the process elevated dance, via its mediated image, to the level of spectacle.”

This carnivorous camera may be redeployed, made into an ontological tool that pulls into sharp focus - using hand-held and close-up shots - the discursive nature of the moving body, drawing through the lens onto the timeline

its power, emotion, movement, inviting the informal, the authentic, the personal, rather than the transcendent, the abstract and the spectacular.

In this way the context for screendance is opened to difference, to becoming more discursive. The camera is employed as narrator, as voyeur, as proprioceptor ...

Thinking thoroughly about the “Camera as_____” ensures that the camera captures, enframes and is loaded with the screendance maker’s accumulated knowledges, philosophies, intention and subject matter. The control of the media shines through the technology onto the retina and into body of the viewer.

How this might work in practice:

Decide on your Rhetorical Frame: Aim, Audience, Medium, Subject.

Tick off the AFDA headings - concept, performance, delivery, aesthetics & production.

For a linear narrative, for example, you might start in this fashion:

Shot One: Camera as Narrator

W/S on tripod. Tilt, angle, speed and framing are chosen to establish the concept, location, style, mood, tone and emotion. A location is chosen that is appropriate to the concept and the characters, capturing their style, movement and personalities. Correct sound, correct lighting for the time of day. It’s all about concept and intention.

Release forms making you sure you have clearance to shoot there and the right to shoot these performers. Time to do the shoot? Power? Resources such as funds, food, transportation. Though you may not actually “see” these in the shot, they have a remarkable effect on the cast and crew. If, for example, everyone is uncomfortable, hungry, or cold, the eyes of the lens see and capture everything!

Now you are on course to invent the “camera as” you need it. You are loading the frame to engage the viewer with your visceral and intellectual intentions: Camera as voyeur, proprioceptor, contact improviser...

References

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