Maya Deren, *Choreography for the Camera*

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Choreography consists not only of designing the dancer's individual movements but also of designing the patterns in which he and his movements, as a unit, make in relationship to a spatial area. Up until now, the usual area in which the dancer moves is defined by the theater stage.

A theater stage can be theater as purely abstract, formal area – a geometric shape and amount of space – within which the choreographer designs a formal pattern; or, with addition of backdrops and stage properties, it can either represent naturalistically or symbolize stylistically, some geographic location. But even if in these latter cases, the scene is changed a number of times, the space in which the dancer moves remains, more or less, an oblong of varying proportions bounded by three sides and the audience stage front.

Accordingly, the problem of the choreographer has been to use that area meaningfully and with interest. In designing his dance patterns he plans on the fact that this space is visible as a unit at all times and he composes, accordingly, for such an area and for stable audience. When, however, a motion-picture camera has been brought to dance, the film-maker usually feels compelled to take advantage of the mobility of the camera. Consequently, the more successful the choreographer has been in composing in theatrical terms, the more carefully worked out patterns are destroyed by the restiveness of a camera which bobs into the wings, onto the stage for a close-up, up to the rafters, down to orchestra pit. In most dance films the dancer, knowing little of the possibilities of camera and cutting, works in terms of theatrical choreographic integrity, refuses to sit and concern himself with photographic-pictorial effects which usually have nothing to do with intentions of a dancer. The usual unsatisfactory result is neither fish nor fowl – its neither good film nor good dance.

When I began making films, some years ago, my first concern was to emancipate the camera from theatrical traditions in general, and especially in terms of spatial treatment. The central character of these films moved in a universe which was not governed by material, geographical laws of *here* and *there* as distant places, mutually accessible only by considerable travel. Rather, he moved in a world of imagination in which, as in our day or night-dreams, a person is first one place and then another without travelling between. It was a choreography in space, except that individual moved naturalistically, as far as the body movements were concerned.

More and more I began to think of working with the formalized, stylized movement of dance, of taking the dancer out of the theater and giving him the world as a stage. This would mean not only that the fixed front view and the rigid walls of the theater oblong would be removed, or even that the scene of activity would be changed more often than in the theater, but it meant also that a whole new set of relationships between the dancer and space could be developed. Dance, which is to natural movement what poetry is to conversational prose, should like poetry, transcend pedestrian boundaries.

Since I had only an interested layman's knowledge of actual dance movement, I needed a collaborator for such an experiment, a professional, highly trained dancer who would be willing and able to forego theatrical traditions in favor of the potentialities of cinematographic choreography. I was fortunate in finding such a collaborator in Talley Beatty. Together we made a very short, but compact, *Study in Choreography for Camera*. The stills which are here reproduced were made by Hella Heyman in the course of shooting the movie, and they attempt, by various photographic devices, to convey the action and quality of the film itself.

I intend this film mainly as a sample of film-dance – that is, a dance so related to camera and cutting that it cannot be "performed" as a unit anywhere but in this particular film. In the short space (limited by the financial problems of films production) of the film I have been able only to suggest the potentialities of such a form. It is my earnest hope that film-dance will be rapidly developed and that, in the interest of such a development, a new era of collaboration between dancers and film-makers will open up – one in which both would pool their creative energies and talents towards an integrated art expression.

The Film Described

The opening sequences illustrate the exploitation of the moving field of vision, and also of the use of an uninterrupted camera for concealing the methods by which an illusion is achieved. In the finished film, the camera starting at the right, makes a slow, continuous turn towards the left, until it has almost completed a circle. In the course of this turn it discovers the same dancer four separate times, in different stages of his spiral movement, and each time, the dancer is closer to the camera. This curious illusion, in which the tempo of the spiral movement of the dancer is synchronized with the tempo of the turning camera, is achieved as follows: the camera starts photographing, and turning, comes upon Talley Beatty, and passes him. When Beatty is no longer in view, the camera stops photographing. Beatty then takes a position, outside the view of camera, to the left. The camera starts photographing, picking up the turn where it left off, and again comes upon Beatty as it goes to the left. This is repeated three times, until, in the close-up Beatty's head sinks out the frame.

Metropolitan Museum. This shot illustrates a creative us of the lens. The wide-angle lens here has made the Egyptian Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art appear much longer then it really is. Beatty, starting very close to the camera, is able to cover the distance to the end of the hall very easily. However, the exaggerated perspective of the lens, by causing him to diminish in size very rapidly, makes it seem as if he had covered a tremendous distance in relatively short time.

The pirouette. This sequence is an example of how the camera can actually collaborate in creating dance movement. The movement here is a simulated pirouette, that is, the head, which is shown alone in close-up, turns in a pirouette; Beatty, however, was actually doing a dervish turn on both feet. The dervish turn can be sustained for an indefinite number of revolutions, with the balance required to keep the head within an inch or two of its original position (necessary for the close-up framing). Because this turn could be sustained with balance, it could be photographed for quite a long time without interruptions, in the course of which time the camera speed was changed from extreme slow-motion to extreme acceleration. The movement, then, begins with a dream-like quality, and ends up with the blurring of a machine part.

Extension outdoors, close-up indoors. Here the dancer begins with an extension outdoors. As he lowers his leg, the camera photographs until the leg has descended to about waist level. Later, the camera, in close-up photographs the same leg, travelling at the same speed, as it enters the edge of the frame at about waist level, except that the scene is now an apartment. When these two shots are cut together, the illusion is that Beatty has stepped from the woods into an apartment with a single, unbroken movement.

Rising into leap. Here the actual action consisted of Beatty's dropping from the height, with a spiral twist, and landing on the ground. By photographing in in reverse, however, I created the illusion of his rising suddenly from the ground with the same quality of release and ease with which a balloon mounts when it is suddenly freed. This technique has often been used for comic effects, such as divers coming out of water backwards and landing upright on the diving board. Here is has been used for its effect upon the quality of motion, to create on film, the idealized leap which is unmarred by the effort of contradicting gravity and which comes, without preparation, directly out of pirouette.

In the film a leap is sustained for almost a half-minute, a much longer period than is humanly possible. This was achieved by relating camera angle and field of vision to the cutting together of the film. It begins with a shot of Beatty leaving the ground, cut off before he starts to come down. This is followed by a close shot of the torso which passes through the frame in an attitude of ascendancy; this is followed by a full-figure of Beatty leaping, except that both his take-off and his landing are cut off, leaving only the moment of horizontal plateau; this is followed by a close-up of his torso starting a gentle descent; followed by a full-figure, in an attitude of descent, cut off just short of the landings; concluded by a descent which includes the landing and the final posture. Here, on film, is the idealized, floating leap.