Between Faces – a desktop presentation

the premise

On Friday 31st September this year an earthquake along the coast of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi triggered a tsunami that devastated the city of Palu.

A survivor of the Tsunami, Aiman Al Ali was interviewed by the BBC a few days later and among descriptions of the harrowing things he'd experienced, seen and heard, he said this:

> *I only have my body*

They are, even given the situation, quite beautiful words. And to imagine the circumstances that would make these words utter-able.

But then he added, after a short pause, as if he'd forgotten …

> *… my body … and my phone.*
>
> *– "Tsunami Survivor: 'People Are Afraid of Sleeping in Their Houses'" 2018*

In the same week, during the supreme court confirmation hearing of Brett Kavanaugh, the US senator Elizabeth Warren posted the following on twitter.

Video on Twitter – (Warren 2018)

Were *you* glued to your screen?

I was.

But this desktop presentation is not about glue, or Tsunamis, or Brett Kavanaugh. But it *is* about screens, and in particular the particularly mobile screen of our time. It is the obviously *ubiquitous* little screens that make up "the stuff of everyday life" (Anton 2015, 14), and that are "necessitating new forms of content and an adjusted spatial and bodily interaction with them" (Hesselberth and Poulaki 2017, 3).

They are the so-called fourth screens, the screens that have come after cinema, after television, and after the computer (Miller 2014).

This desktop presentation then is based on a single premise, and one that has been discussed a lot in a lot of different fields: that we are being changed by our small *fourth* screens. That the choreography of our lives – our many and various lives – is being changed by these mobile devices that are screens. That we are all – and please excuse the laziness of this metaphor – intimately connected to a dance of screens.

[call it a screendance]

the suspicion

There are, of course, those of us who carry a few suspicions about our fourth screens. Athena Chavarria who worked at Facebook's philanthropic arm (yes, it has such a thing) wrote the following very recently:

> *I am convinced the devil lives in our phones and is wreaking havoc on our children.*
>
> *– Chavarria, in Bowles 2018*[1]

Or, the way in which we carry around absent others as potential social exchanges wherever we go, has been described as "an evacuation of the depth and thickness of reality, and a substitution in its place of a superficial existence –- something unreal or artificial, and thus suspect" (Anton 2015, 18).

And of course it's pretty easy to describe mobile phone viewing as "a more individual and potentially isolated experience" (Engberg and Bolter 2017, 165).

As the bezels that have historically framed screens disappear from smart-phones, it is as if the smart-phone has reduced itself to being only a screen; a screen made to be touched by our dancing fingers. They are screens that carry our prints, our gestures, our sweat, our DNA, and yes, our fecal matter.[2]

insert Gutenberg

I'd like to bring Johannes Gutenberg onto the screen.[3] Actually, it was Harmony Bench who brought Mr. Gutenberg into dance studies.[4] She was describing the "unleashing of documentation" of dances of all kinds on YouTube and Facebook, and how it has "altered the landscape of available gestures for both conceptual and popular artists, who find vast treasure troves of 'found choreography' in social media sites" (Bench 2015). This is what she wrote:

> *Let me be clear: for those of us who produce or conduct research in the areas of dance, movement, and gesture, this is our 'Gutenberg'.*
>
> *– Bench 2015*

In other words, dance has been radically changed by its digital accessibility. The way we watch dance now – and regardless of whether that dance has been made for the screen or not – is through our personal screens, and in particular our mobile screens. This is a source of anxiety for dance – the elephant in the room in undergraduate dance studies – because dance has long valorised immediacy and liveness. You recognise the anxiety by the way that dance scholars embraced kinaesthetic empathy as (at last) some science that seemed to chime with our long-held belief that when we watch dance live, we move with – and are moved by – the dancers.

But what about screendance? Does Bench's Gutenberg moment for dance change anything for the practice and presentation of screendance? I think it does. It has certainly changed the literacy of those that watch any form of dance on screen (or indeed anything on screen). We have become ever more sensitised to seeing the way in which edits work, the ways in which

framing affects the feel of the action; we have become more literate at seeing the ways in which narratives are constructed or avoided, the ways in which sound alters our felt states.

Bench's Gutenberg moment also, and most obviously, creates a glut of dancing ready to be watched on screens. This glut of accessibility – all types of dancing: under-produced, over-produced, glimpses, gifs, fractions, *fortnited*, all types of people and avatars dancing all over the world – this glut of accessibility blurs or even erases the distinctiveness of screendance. If such distinctiveness ever existed. If you are watching these dances on a mobile device, whether or not it is screendance is utterly irrelevant.

the apparatus and the body

It is the hyper-presence of smart-phones and their ultra-portability that means we ought to take them very seriously in dance and screendance. In the simplest of terms, we have a moving body on screen, a moving body having operated the camera (which is often simply a smart-phone screen), and a moving body holding a screen/smart-phone as the video is played back and watched. Indeed, the consumer often mimics the operator by holding precisely the same type of device that was used to shoot the video.[5] Imagine watching a scene from *Vertigo* (Hitchcock 1958) through the same kind of apparatus used to shoot the scene, all while you yourself are moving, or on the go. It's dizzying. And dizzyingly obvious.

There is of course a long and well-documented history of film and video practices being changed by evolving technological apparatus: hand-held cameras, the development of tape and non-linear editing. But we are in the midst of a different kind of performative evolution in video when the small apparatus for capture is the same small apparatus for watching.

Here's a short video. It's actually some documentation of an installation by the Lebanese visual artist Rabih Mroué.[6] It's called *The Pixelated Revolution. Non-academic Lecture* (Mroué 2013). I'd like to thank my friend Tamara Tomic-Vajagic for alerting me to it.[7]

The Pixelated Revolution. Non-academic Lecture – (Mroué 2013)

Later in the same video, Mroué says:

> *I assume that what the protestors in Syria are seeing is the exact same thing that they are watching directly on the tiny screens of their mobile phones as they film. What I mean is that they are not looking around to choose a certain scene or angle to shoot but rather they are always simultaneously looking through the camera and shooting. The eye and the lens of the camera see the same thing. The camera has become an integral part of the body. Their cameras are not cameras but eyes implanted in their hands. (Mroué 2013)*

It's hard to go back to the conceptual after that, let alone conceptual concerns for screendance, but I'm going to try. It's pretty clumsy, and in doing so I risk trivialising that video. Perhaps this is inevitable.

Martina Leeker, Imanuel Schipper and Timon Beyes write about the apparatus and the body in their book *Performing the Digital* (2017b).

> *This neat separation of human agency and non-human 'procedurality' has become untenable. Human bodies and technological apparatuses enter instead into a relation of performativity …*
>
> *– Leeker, Schipper, and Beyes 2017a, 11*

There is a performative balance that exists between the apparatus and the body it extends. And the "drastic change of scale" (Engberg and Bolter 2017, 166) towards compact cinematics "constitutes a changed relationship between the viewer and the cinematic object and suggests a new aesthetic in which the viewer's experience is more tactile" (Engberg and Bolter 2017, 166).

And such tactility – both in the way we hold and cradle the smart-phone and caress and tap and swipe its screen to make things happen – involves a different set of eyes. They are eyes that Kim Louise Walden describes as *peering* as opposed to the "glance" with television, and the "*gaze* at the cinema screen" (Walden 2017, 142).

These developments – screens we peer into on devices of both capture and transmission, that themselves are predicated on tactility and mobility – represent an opportunity for generative thinking, practice and understanding.

There are, as you can imagine, plenty of screendances for micro-screens. When Lucy Cash and Becky Edmunds worked together as Straybird they produced and curated *Stray Gifts (To Be Claimed By Whoever Shall Find)* for Dance Umbrella in 2014 (straybird 2014). It was a remarkable collection of short films and sound for small spaces and screens. Here's a sample of Marisa Zanotti's work for *Stray Gifts* called *leftwing mirror*:

Leftwing mirror – (Zanotti 2014)

And this is from *After Thinking About Pocahontas and Me* by Becky Edmunds and Fiona Wright from 2010:

After Thinking About Pocahontas and Me – (Edmunds and Wright 2010)

And another by Becky and Fiona called *Distant Wars* from 2014:

Distant Wars – (Edmunds and Wright 2014)

And back in 2006, David Corbet and I made a large number of two-second Microflicks, designed to be played back on loop on the 5th generation iPod classic, released in 2005 – the first iPod to be able to playback video.

Flicker – (Ellis and Corbet 2006b)
Closer – (Ellis and Corbet 2006a)
Three Makes a Couple – (Corbet and Ellis 2006b)
There – (Corbet and Ellis 2006a)

That project happened only a year before the iPhone was first released in 2007, but that feels like a lifetime before the 52% of people in the UK who owned smart-phones in 2012, and the 85% who owned smart-phones in 2017 (ConsultancyUK 2017). It's such a recent phenomenon, and the ways we are adapting and modifying our behaviour, our bodies, our tastes, our selves and our lives in response are still so fresh.

the self and the screen

In 1997 Sherry Turkle, the MIT Professor of Social Studies specialising in human-technology interaction, wrote a book called *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the Internet*. Here's what she said about computer networked gaming technologies at the time:

> *We come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine. A decade ago, when I first called the computer a second self, these identity-transforming relationships were almost always one-on-one, a person alone with a machine. This is no longer the case.*

> *– Turkle 1997, 9*

Turkle was calling the computer a second self in 1987. And as much as networked gaming is still a massive industry, far exceeding the text-based MUDs or 'multi-user dungeons' that Turkle was discussing in 1997, we would appear to be seeing ourselves differently once again in what are extraordinarily one-one-one relationships: each of us and our mobile devices. It is not surprising that in 2011 Turkle would write a book called *Alone Together* (Turkle 2011).

The smart-phone is a remarkably social device that seems to produce anxiety about isolation. What a thing of psychological beauty it is. Although video in general has a troubled psychological past. In 1976 the American art critic Rosalind Krauss wondered whether or not that the "medium of video is narcissism" (Krauss 1976, 50).

Part of 1 of 5.2 (self) Portraits – (Ellis 2018)

That's from a project called *5.2 (self) portraits*.

so what?

The question of course is what does all this have to do with screendance; screendance as something to watch and screendance as something to create. How might these ideas about screens and the self help test our own assumptions and practices in relation to the body and the moving image; to help us think differently about screendance?

I think to a certain extent that these concerns require a shared understanding of what constitutes screendance. Talk about a can of worms. I mean, who really wants to hear another attempt to define screendance?

I'll say three short things on this matter that reveal certain tensions or paradoxes …

One. I am ambivalent about the body (moving or not), and its presence on screen as some kind of signifier of screendance or the choreographic. In our work as editors of the International Journal of Screendance, Harmony Bench and I have worked to open out the conversations and scholarly work to try and prevent the emergence of some kind of screendance silo or echo chamber. You might say that our remit has been: "if this writing is thinking through the nature of the moving image and (expanded) choreographic thinking and practice, then it's appropriate for this journal".

Two. Back in 2007 at the OpenSource Videodance symposium in Findhorn Scotland, Claudia Kappenberg critiqued the idea developed as part of a screendance manifesto in 2006 that "Inherent in the proposition of Screendance is the possibility that through an accretion of images of bodies in motion, a larger truth may unfold" (Kappenberg 2007).[8] Kappenberg asked two questions:

> *What do 'bodies in motion' provide, that is so privileged in dance on screen?*
>
> *Why should screendance be attached to a notion of 'bodies in motion'?*
>
> – Kappenberg 2007

Three. Contrary to all this, I remain nourished and stimulated by what I think of as simple *fleshed encounters*. The Hongi in New Zealand is a quite remarkable example of two people meeting, touching, and exchanging breath.[9]

This is an interface.

Sometimes I think that the screendance community has a rather profound and desperate desire to preserve some kind of cinematic purity. We see it in the inherited format of the film festival, focused for the most part on a single large screen, the high resolution projection systems.

In their introduction to *Compact Cinematics* Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki say the following:

> *How is this classical function of cinema, to drive and guide attention across a series of images, still pertinent in light of these emerging compact cinematic phenomena?*
>
> – Hesselberth and Poulaki 2017, 5

It is as if in screendance we are holding onto a rather cobbled together set of practices that carry no need in the world; that we are simply going about our (precarious) business as usual.

What I like to imagine is a radical – and potentially self-harming – opening out of the care with which we apply the filter of screendance. That screendance is just that – a filter – a way of looking at, or noticing things about moving (and still) images. And that this filter is being totally re-oriented or re-calculated by our remarkable peered connection to the fourth screen, the hyper-mobile.

At the end of *To Be A Machine*, Mark O'Connell's populist introduction into the rather weird and wired world of *transhumanism*, he suggests the following:

> *What I mean to say is that I am part machine: encoded in the world, encrypted in its strange and irresistible signals. I look at my hands as they type, their hardware of bone and flesh, and I look at the images of these words as they appear on a screen, my screen: a feedback loop of input and output, an algorithmic pattern of signal and transmission. The data, the code, the communication.*

– O'Connell 2017, 234

The mobile screen is the screen of our time nearly all around the world. It is the object we watch, shoot and live our lives with. It's not so much we are between faces as that it is becoming (or has become) our other face. Our ghost face. Our second face. Our best-dressed face. The face we had before we were born, the face we will have after our deaths. An intra-face. It is not an other face, it is continuity; it is our lives stretched out before us, behind us, and beyond us. In many respects we need to be willing "to recognise and accept [our] own mediated artificiality; that is, one's prosthetic extension into the world" (Anton 2015, 25).

This is important for screendance – and here I am zipping back to my earlier discussion of Harmony Bench's idea about dance's Gutenberg moment – because all dance is now screen-oriented or oriented towards screens. There is an irresistible press or squeeze as we each peer into and through our mobile surfaces. But it's bigger than this. Perhaps all movement and human activity is screen-oriented; that is, all movement is screen movement. We are looking at a "substitution of screen for body" (Anton 2015, 16). Aren't we all always just bodies on and with screens? This is a precarious position for so-called screendance – a form that most commonly wants to explicitly place the body on screen. The form is in danger of being consumed. Perhaps there is no more to be seen of bodies on screens. We are screens, and they are us; a field consumed by culture. Perhaps we in screendance are like farriers – those people who make and fit horse-shoes – artisans of a dying trade, with horses long since superseded.

How do these propositions make you feel?

I think I mostly feel enthralled, and I feel curious about how they force me to think carefully about my dancing body in this world.

What then are we to do as screendance people?

I imagine two divergent possibilities, or two ends of a continuum. The first is to abandon experimental choreographic screen practices and simply celebrate people dancing. People dancing in warehouses, people dancing in studios, people dancing at home, in clubs, in forests next to far-off locations close to beaches. People dancing with people, people dancing with their pets. Goddam people dancing everywhere. Such a proposition fills me with joy (although I'm wary of the clichés).

The second is to nestle profoundly into the cracks of the screen-body interface: the micro-choreographies of us, and them, together, apart. To re-enter a play – to appropriate Saul

Anton's words – of reflection and substitution – of subject and photographer, photograph, video and smart-phone, real space and image space (Anton 2015, 16). To look for new dances, new choreographies, ones that test the edges of how we sit, stand, hold, look, peer and connect. Ones that pull together and pry apart our screen lives. The way we choreograph screens, and the way they choreograph us. There are new dances here. New choreographies between what divides us and what unites us.

To be between faces is to recognise multiple selves peering in at each other, smiling, grunting, snarling, crying, moving, recoiling, recording, recalling, or just noticing. They are faces of all kinds – bodies, apparatus, manipulated, manipulable – holding each other, and being held.

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